

ARTICLE APPEARED
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NEWSWEEK
2 July 1984

INTERNATIONAL

ITALY

Connecting the Bulgarians

Did Bulgarian agents direct the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II three years ago? Did the Soviet Union put them up to it? Ever since word of the purported Bulgarian connection began to leak out, many Western governments have acted as though they wanted the story to go away. Even the Reagan administration, normally not at all bashful about denouncing Moscow's "evil empire," has been mum on the subject. The case against Bulgaria still has not been proved, and it may never be. But after a painstaking investigation, Italian authorities appear to be on the verge of indicting three Bulgarians and five Turks, including Mehmet Ali Agca, who already has been convicted of wounding John Paul. And last week, for the first time, an Italian prosecutor said in public what many people suspect in private: the Bulgarians did it.

"That's the conclusion of my investigation," prosecutor Antonio Albano told the Associated Press. He said the Polish pope had been shot because of the "the social convulsions" set off in his homeland by the rise of the Solidarity movement, which the pontiff had encouraged. Albano conceded that his 78-page report, which is still secret, did not specifically mention a Soviet role in the assassination attempt. But he asked: "Do you think Bulgaria could do this sort of thing without Moscow's agreement? Do you think Bulgaria's decision to boycott the Olympic Games was made by Bulgaria

alone? I don't think so. But, of course, this is my personal opinion."

The opinion is likely to get a courtroom test late this year or early in 1985. Albano's report recommends a trial for Bulgarian airline official Sergei Antonov, who is in Italian custody, and for two other Bulgarians who fled before they could be arrested. All three of them are accused of complicity in the attack. The report says Agca should be charged with smuggling into Italy the pistol he used to shoot the pope. Albano alleged that four other Turks, two of whom are in Italian custody, also were involved in the assassination plot. The next move is up to Ilario Martella, the magistrate in charge of the investigation, who is expected to send the case to trial after he makes public his own report sometime this summer.

Retraction: Whether the case can be proved will depend on the extent to which Martella can provide independent verification for the story Agca has told. The Turk is a practiced liar. Already, he has admitted that some of the information he supplied about Antonov's wife, job and apartment was gleaned from the Italian press. And Agca has retracted his claim that the Bulgarians planned to kill Lech Walesa when the Solidarity leader visited Rome in January 1981. The Soviet news agency Tass complained last week that Albano's report "dis-



Antonov: Will Agca's story stand up in court?

regards the numerous distortions of the facts" by Agca.

American officials were reluctant to endorse the Italian findings. Initially, the CIA dismissed the Bulgarian connection as a flight of fancy. Later, as the Italians began to pile up their evidence, the administration took pains not to cheer them on. "We had to be purer than Caesar's wife in this, so the Soviets could not scream that the U.S. masterminded [the case]," said State Department counselor Edwin Derwinski. But if the prosecution can prove the charges, Washington may change its tune. Then the attack on the pope may become a fresh cause of animosity between the superpowers.

RUSSELL WATSON with ANDREW NAGORSKI in Rome and JANE WHITMORE in Washington